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ABSTRACT

This paper examines research on urban education, looking at what works and what does not. It introduces a theme issue of the "Illinois Schools Journal" that examines various interventions from the perspectives of members of the Center for Urban Research and Education (CURE) and tenure-track professors from Chicago State University's College of Education. In recent years, the student population has grown, has begun to include children from more diverse backgrounds, and has diversified the kinds of educational programs offered. However, these accomplishments have fallen far short of the vision of a universal school system that provides all children with equal access to academic success. Various interventions hold promise for reforming education for poor, minority students. They feature such elements as greater parent involvement, a challenging and relevant curriculum, restructured school organizations, and use of technology to enhance learning. The papers included in this theme issue focus on: the work of the CURE; the impact of parent participation; the need for culturally relevant curriculum; the benefits of small schools; and varied uses of computers in education. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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Lessons Learned about Urban Education

Consider, if you will, the "black hole," a hypothetical star so densely compressed and so massive that not even light can escape its tremendous gravity. Once inside the black hole, objects become distorted and the laws of physics no longer apply. During the past 12 months on separate occasions, I have heard this metaphor used by colleagues to describe what occurs in large urban schools and school districts. They contend that making predictions about the outcome of objects and people entering the dense hole of urban schools is a complicated undertaking at best.

Many reform educators might agree. For example, Kenneth Leithwood (1992) points out that schools are highly complex systems consisting of parts with greater interdependencies than were earlier believed to exist. He suggests that schools can be judged in part on the coherence of their designs and on the basis of what and how well they contribute to the larger organizational structure (Leithwood, 1987). Sarason (1990) predicts that educational reform will fail utterly unless this complexity is acknowledged. Terrence Deal (1990) believes that revolutionary changes in public educational institutions are rare because the entire community must examine carefully those elements that give meaning to the educational process. Furthermore, Mark Holmes (1987) from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education avows that no plan to improve schools makes sense unless there is reasonable clarity about what the change involves and what constitutes "better." In urban schools, identifying what is better is not an easy job.

What Appears to Work? What Does Not?

Wang and Kovach (1996) suggest that over several decades, we have increased the proportion of the U.S. population in school, included children from more diverse sociocultural

and economic backgrounds, and diversified the kinds of educational programs offered. "... by emphasizing the value of education and its potential as a tool for social and economic equality, we have made enormous progress in ensuring equal access to a free public education for all children and youth in the United States (p. 3)." They note, however, that these accomplishments have fallen far short of the vision of a universal school system that provides all children with equal access to success in school. They also remind us that significant learning occurs outside schools, and the conditions for learning in schools are greatly influenced by the family and all elements of the community.

In spite of much criticism, the literature on urban education reports on a number of interventions that hold promise for reforming education for poor, minority youths. While the lists vary in terms of their content and number of items cited, certain common elements appear, such as greater parent involvement, a challenging and relevant curriculum, restructured school organizations, and the use of technology to enhance learning. This focus issue of the Illinois Schools Journal will examine each of these interventions from the perspectives of members of the Center for Urban Research and Education and tenure-track professors from the College of Education at Chicago State University.

Searching for ways to address the serious issues plaguing urban schools can be both frustrating and rewarding. In the opening article, former CURE director, Lorrie C. Reed, questions the erstwhile nature of quick fixes for the urban education problem. She describes the work of the Center for Urban Research and Education (CURE), and cautions educators that much work remains to be done.

Parent involvement is a component of many urban school reform programs. Flaxman et

al. (1998) reports positive impacts of parent involvement related to such activities as listening to children read at home, participating in joint activities with children, and communicating high expectations, among other things. In this focus issue, Jean Murphy describes parent involvement in terms of black hegemony, a form of cultural capital related to ordering and patterning of behaviors, establishing creeds, and reinforcing ways of thinking found resident in cultures of high-performing African Americans. She suggests that this kind of parent intervention in the lives of children will foster resilience or the desire and ability to achieve in spite of tough odds.

Equally important in affecting urban educational outcomes is the curriculum. Williams and Newcomb (1994) discuss the complexity of school change and the centrality of culture in influencing student outcomes. They conclude that tracking, remediation, and increased budgets cannot, in isolation, improve student achievement. In their opinion, culture and cognitive development are interrelated; when curriculum and instruction are tied to the cultural experiences and values of urban students, schooling becomes more meaningful. Catherine Busch, current director of the Center for Urban Research and Education at Chicago State University, traces the historical development of curriculum for African Americans. She emphasizes that teaching dogma is no longer appropriate for the optimal development of learners.

Small schools have thrust themselves into the school reform limelight recently. Raywid (1995) reports that over the past 30 years research has revealed that disadvantaged students stand to benefit in many different ways from attending smaller schools. Some of the benefits include better attendance and retention, better behavior and attitude, extra attention from staff, as well as enhanced academic performance. Cynthia Valenciano, a member of CURE who has worked as an external partner to establish a small schools network on the south side of Chicago, shares her

reflections on what makes schools better. She notes that change is non-linear and that the factory model of schooling has become obsolete. Furthermore, she cautions us that there is no single best way to do things. In order to change schools, the culture of the institution must be reshaped.

Finally, technology represents another way to address problems surrounding urban education, according to a number of educators. As stakeholders and taxpayers, we tend to wonder, however, whether the investment in technology is effective in terms of having an impact upon student learning. Latham (1999) reports on a study conducted by Wenglinsky, who used 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data to explore the effects of computer use on 4th and 8th grade student achievement in mathematics. The study showed that technology can and does make a difference, but the difference is highly dependent upon he context in which technology is used. Other educators, specifically Conyers, Kappel, and Rooney (1999), tell us that a successful technology program can bring about significantly improved test scores, a high level of student excitement, and a renewal in staff enthusiasm. According to these writers, we should use technology to learn, not just learn how to use technology.

As can be seen in the literature, educational technology can take on many forms, ranging from stand alone computers housed in classrooms to wide area networks that connect users world wide. Applications comprise everything from games, drill-and-practice programs, complex multimedia systems, to the Internet (Burnett, 1994). Given this range of technological possibilities, educators should give careful thought to how the innovation will be used to affect student outcomes. One such technological innovation is distance learning. In urban settings, with schools inhabiting racially and ethnically homogeneous geographical enclaves, distance learning has the potential to create diversity through teleconferencing. CURE member Gabriel Gomez

discusses some of the problems, issues, and adaptations required to make distance learning more effective as a learning tool.

In Conclusion

Confucius once said, "*Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous*" (The Confucian Analects, Book 2:15(68:10)). As reflective educators, we can learn from our mistakes. For example, we must now acknowledge that urban schools and school districts are complicated, multi-faceted organizations that have to be examined carefully and critically, organizations that need to be fine tuned periodically in response to changes in their constituencies. Through ongoing, sound research we must constantly bring to light those practices we deem to be efficacious in bringing about growth in student outcomes and constantly question those indicating possible deleterious effects. We are compelled to find ways to foster better understanding of the urban social context of public school students. Finally, we are obligated to gain greater insight into the experiences that students form through exposure to the non-school curriculum. These tenets lie at the heart of the mission of CURE, the Center for Urban Research and Education at Chicago State University. Our task, we realize, is not easy, but we must be constantly vigilant in our endeavors.

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